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ABSTRACT

Oppression of African American people includes racism, sexism, and classism. Oppression is understood as a process that infuses prejudice with power. This power is then used to limit or hinder access to societal rights from those identified as lacking power. Advocacy is a process that defuses prejudice and attempts to redefine power by redistribution, thus allowing for greater access for all. The goals are the betterment of the whole. This paper discusses slavery in the United States, the history of race oppression for African Americans, and the residual effects of oppression and explains that it is very important for advocates for African American people to have a good understanding of these issues. Eighteen suggestions to be used by teachers, educators, counselors, and politicians as advocacy strategies to assist African Americans are provided. (Contains 6 references, 3 recommended readings, and 8 recommended resources.) (MKA)

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Chapter Two

Advocacy on behalf of African-American clients

By Jo-Ann Lipford Sanders

"...though it is sometimes very difficult to imagine our nation totally free of racism and sexism, my intellect, my heart and my experience tell me that it is actually possible. For that day when neither exists we must all struggle..."
— James Baldwin, African-American writer

The collective struggle suggested by James Baldwin is a compelling call for advocacy against racial and sexual oppression. As we think about African-American people, aspects of oppression are expanded to include racism, sexism, and classism. Tripartite oppression has impacted phases of life for African-Americans in the United States differently. However, "because of the pervasive institutional nature of racism in this country, no person of African descent has been able to fully escape the ravages of its grip" (Sanders, 1995). Racism, in all its aberrant and complex forms, includes more than skin color. Looking at the comprehensive nature of racism, one notices the intercorrelation between sexism, classism, and other intangible constructs. Skin color oppression (racism), most often used in oppressive actions against Americans with African ancestry, becomes the focus of this discourse.

Oppression is understood as a process which infuses prejudice with power. This power is then used to limit or hinder access to societal rights from those identified as lacking power. Advocacy is a process which defuses prejudice and attempts to redefine power by redistribution thus allowing for greater access for all. The goals are the betterment of the whole. The African proverb proclaiming "I Am Because We Are" could be a mantra for African-American advocacy.

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Slavery in the United States

African-Americans are the largest group of "forced residents" to the United States in recorded history. A recent PBS documentary, *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery,* chronicled African's subjugation to a myriad of cruelties associated with their transcontinental kidnapping and subsequent enslavement. Under slavery various African tribes were methodically stripped of family, language, music, religion, dietary, and grooming comforts. The brutality of the kidnapping, transport, and dehumanization of Africans in America worsened as skin color and physiognomy became the gauge for inhumane treatment. Inhumane treatment practices then became ingrained in a philosophy of "Black Inferiority," prevailing to date.

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois, an African-American scholar prophesied "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the Color Line" (cited in Paschal & Bontemps, 1993, p. 263). Unfortunately, as we peer into the windows of the twenty-first century, African-Americans still struggle against the effects of "the color line." Note for example the recent findings of President Bill Clinton's Commission on Race, "It is, we believe, essential to recall the facts of racial domination... We as a nation need to understand that whites tend to benefit, either unknowingly or consciously from this country's history of white privilege" (*White Privilege*, 1998). This multiracial and multiethnic Commission reported, in 1998, that some Americans have easier access to societal resources, based on the color of their skin or racial identification, than others and that social disparities around race are profound enough to provide a focal point of their report.

History of Race Oppression for African-Americans

A comprehensive historical discussion of racial oppression is a significant discussion. The seeds of racial oppression grew from the Anglo Saxon myth of race superiority. The rationalization of the African slave system was enhanced by a Puritan view identifying civilized people as Christian and White. Slavery was really a societal dichotomy when considered against the backdrop of Puritan beliefs. To justify and resolute slavery, Africans had to be dehumanized to chattel. So the natural, logical, and moral objections to slavery were overcome because these chattel were needed for the economic advantages that the institution offered. The system dictated the need! Tripartite oppression thus became

deeply rooted as systemic institutional racism, discrimination, psychological and educational racism, and is maintained by stereotyping, labeling, misinformation, racial scapegoating, and fear.

African-Americans are still faced with institutional structures that are willing to abate morals and values in deference to economic advantages for some. Institutions continue to pursue the economic objectives of slavery over the logical and moral issues associated with subjugation. Moral issues against discrimination and bigotry are clear but have been made subject to economic issues and the chattel concept. As long as institutions continue to serve economic interests of individuals in power, and can justify these interests from a "Black Inferiority" ideology, there will be a need for advocacy.

Advocacy is needed to overcome institutions that are willing to compromise morals and values for the powerful thereby dictating norms for the society at large.

Advocacy for African-American people must begin with an understanding and appreciation of the savagery of slavery and its continued residual effects.

Residual Effects of Race Oppression

Although the roots of race oppression have been covered by such categorical definitions as political correctness, time, institutionalization, and legislation, "The Doctrine of Black Inferiority" is as much an aspect of American culture today as is apple pie and baseball. Historical marginalization, systemic racism, and discriminatory practices against African-Americans are ingrained in the foundations of Western culture. Over the last several years African-Americans have litigated discriminatory practices against Texaco, Denny's restaurants, and Eddie Bauer clothiers. African-Americans still experience difficulty securing a taxi in such cosmopolitan cities as New York. Even winning the coveted green jacket of the Master's golf classic was not enough to quench the stench of "Black Inferiority." Who would have imagined that the seemingly kind gesture of a late-night ride home in small southern town would become a death ride for an unassuming, single Black father solely because of the color of his skin. Hate crimes against African-Americans, often attributable to youth, are rising! Could this suggest intergenerational transmission of "Black Inferiority" doctrine?

The residual effects of racism are displayed in more than

hate crimes. Because racism is endemic, it has become almost a cliché to blame a Black man for any number of crimes (Daniels, 1995). Take for example the young mother, Susan Smith, who reported that her children were abducted by a Black man; or the White Boston businessman named Charles Stuart who upon murdering his wife, reported a Black man did it, or even the inmate killed alongside Jeffrey Dahmer (who himself was convicted of killing and eating people of color), had accused a Black man of killing his wife. Most recently a priest stabbed himself in excess of 20 times only to accuse a Black man. Had not police investigators been committed to advocacy and fair play, Black men and indeed African-American communities would have been under a "state of siege."

Societal responses to diversity have been inappropriate. Institutional structures have a programmed response to diversity which is to devalue that which is different. This devaluing is built into such practices as "last hired, first fired," "most qualified," "scientific studies showing genetic deficiencies," "redlining" and "educational intelligence tests" all proving that African-Americans are both different and deficient.

Additionally, many African-Americans have also internalized the "Black Inferiority" into a personal self that is different and deficient. Internalized oppression is being manifested in self deprecating behaviors such as illegal drug use, soaring high school dropout rates, teenage pregnancies, and the color complex, to name a few.

Consequently, it is not enough to simply advocate for changes in direct service. Service providers, educators, mental health professionals, and the public at large must join, consciously acknowledge and tear down the "Great Hegemonic Wall of Race Superiority."

Advocacy Strategies to Assist African-Americans

Advocates for African-American people will be well served by understanding the atrocities of slavery and its prevailing ideology; but that is only half of the story! The strengths used by African- Americans to survive provide the nexus to advocacy.

Following are suggestions for ways in which teachers/ educators/counselors/ politicians and others might make systems work more effectively for African-American people infusing their strengths, customs, and culture:

1. Cultural Awareness is the first step. Advocates must know

themselves. To advocate against endemic constructs, one must have a personal conviction grounded from self analysis. Notice instances when you collude with tripartite oppression. Make opportunities for your views to be challenged and expanded. Unlearning oppression may initially be frightening, but it is liberating as you challenge the essence of who you are. To learn about African-Americans, why not familiarize yourself with African-American scholars. So much that has been known about African-American culture has been offered from someone "looking over into someone else's fence." Interrupt the "Doctrine of Inferiority" by noticing when you cannot accept the scholarship of African-Americans.

2. Encourage Self Advocacy. The mutual help or community of helpers concept is a familiar approach within African-American communities. This is an effort to empower African-Americans to serve as expert helpers while also seeing other African-Americans as competent and caring. It disputes internalized oppression and stereotyping regarding the ableness of African-Americans. Examples of self help groups currently operating within African-American communities are Rites of Passage programs, sickle cell disease mutual-help groups, The National Black Women's Health Project founded by Byllye Y. Avery that has established 50 self help groups in over 41 states, Mothers Against Gangs, Unwed Mothers United, NAACP, and the various tenant self-management organizations in public housing projects. Become aware of other self help groups within African-American communities and do not feel intimated to refer.
3. Accountable Training of Professionals. In a recent study (C. Bradley, personal communication, 1998) of 100 CACREP approved counseling programs only 33% required a multicultural training course prior to practicum. Practicums and internships for education and counseling need to provide incentives for working with African-American clients AND display at least beginning level cultural competence. This means practicum and internship students need to have mandatory requirements to work with African-American and other people of color built into the practicum and internship curriculum. Anyone providing services without knowledge and understanding of the counseling issues would be considered providing unethical care. Why

aren't those who attempt to work with ethnic groups for which they have limited or no knowledge and understanding not held to those same ethical standards?

4. Use resources within communities such as churches and civic leaders to help spread the message. For example, establish Peer Advocates. Befriend a group of African-American clergy. Clergy know their communities and are well respected as leaders within African-American communities. Consider including clergy or a clergy designee as a part of your counseling team.
5. Develop materials about mental health that are culturally appropriate and aggressively disseminate. Raise awareness via infusion in curriculums in schools, colleges, and universities. Raise awareness from a whisper to a full bravado. Make your classrooms, offices, and places of business compelling with pictures, magazines, and posters with African-American faces. Include images of more than sports heroes. Also include African-American scientists, inventors, teachers, poets, etc. Develop video resources with African-Americans for use in community outreach.
6. Come out of your offices (which often represent institutions of oppression) and into African- American communities. Become familiar and trusted. Attend community functions. Establish multiracial teams to be guest presenters. Don't always lecture but try experiential and team building activities to hear the concerns of the communities. Helping professionals and individuals with particular expertise may offer expertise within Black communities. Humphreys and Hamilton (1995) offer a caution about this training presentation, "when outside experts administer social services to communities, they often deprive them of control and produce apathy and alienation. Thus, even when a service is administered effectively by external agents, the meta-message remains, 'You have problems, the rest of us have the solutions.' This can lead service recipients to feel dependent and incompetent (p. 1)."
7. Challenge research and writings, teaching the universal normalcy of individualistic approaches to counseling. Challenge and push the definition of ethical practices which suggest that non-eurocentric mores are inappropriate, i.e., celebrate ethnic holidays at centers to familiarize community with agency; the healing effects of food for many cultures; or the relevance of indigenous supports. Include

emic perspectives of mental health.

8. Raise awareness as you sit in on group and individual supervisions in your private and public practices. Speak up when a colleague has not considered the cultural aspects of cases involving African- Americans. Challenge questionable diagnosis and treatment practices. In mental health settings, African- Americans are more often underserved and misdiagnosed than other clients.
9. Encourage educational professionals to provide accurate and inclusive instruction of American history to include the tremendous efforts of non-Whites and women. Invite African-Americans into classrooms/boardrooms/etc. other than during Black History month.
10. Demystify the stigma associated with race talks by encouraging debate and dialogue among school children, colleagues, family, and others. Become obnoxious and intolerant of the presence of tripartite oppression.
11. Befriend African-American women's groups, sororities, and social clubs. African-American women are the "pulse" of most African-American communities. No one has experienced the struggles over time quite like African-American women. Their unwavering persistence provides the greatest example of advocacy in history. Their sister-friend networks often are precursors to prepastoral counseling. African-American women have provided a roadmap for "doin' what ya' gotta do" to survive.
12. Support Affirmative Action and other anti-discrimination legislation. Lobby and provide information throughout your communities about affirmative action. Benefactors of this legislation must speak out when the laws are challenged. This is an example of hitting "The Wall". Phone or fax your senators' and your representative's offices. Call the US Capitol switchboard (202) 224-3121.
13. Seek more funds to do empirical research of all socioeconomic levels within the African-American community to provide a more adequate picture of the heterogeneity. Understand that there is no such thing as "the African-American community" but in fact African-American communities. African-American people are as diverse as were the kidnapped Africans from various tribes. Although joined by ancestry in Africa and the continual battle against tripartite oppression, their experiences are individual and unique. One-dimensional views of "all"

African-Americans are detrimental to appropriate care.

14. Become an active participant in the numerous "watch-dog" websites fighting for justice. When they notify you of impending legislation, respond. I have listed a few for your consideration. Visit the websites and become aware of the laws.
15. Encourage and advocate for the hiring and promotion of African-American educators, support staff, and admittance of African-Americans into master's and doctoral level programs. Doesn't it concern you when you look around a multicultural world and your clientele or classroom do not reflect this diversity? Inquire as to rationale.
16. Challenge educational curriculum, training of teachers, and testing efforts to reflect culturally reflective learning styles. Courtland Lee (1996) recounts the story of the birds sitting on a fence. The teacher asked the children, if three birds are sitting on a fence and one bird is shot off how many birds would be left? The American child answered "two" (convergent answer). The African child answered, "Not so. There would be none for if one bird is shot the others will fly away (divergent answer). Which answer is correct. The current way our educational system tests, ethnic groups which are structured around more convergent thinking often receive less encouragement.
17. Challenge standards which continue to perpetuate ethnocentrism. Don't be silent. Look for RIM's (racism interruption moments). Don't tolerate racial jokes, slurs, or the propagation of untruths or generalizations about "all Black people." Challenge the irrational. Write to your newspaper when you notice ethnocentrism in writing or reporting.
18. Fight institutions which discriminate against African-Americans. Don't patronize establishments that are unfair to Black people, and let the establishments know your thoughts.

History has shown that advocacy efforts are effective. African-Americans have shown that advocacy efforts are effective. The desegregation of public schools, integration in public places, seating on public transportation, finding adequate lodging, and securing entrance to college were all changed because of advocacy efforts. Political advocacy has a proven history of success in fighting for civil liberties, lobbying for entitlements for the

disenfranchised, demanding access to public facilities, or litigating against discrimination practices for African-Americans. Don't become confused and mistaken about the mission of advocacy. African-American people are strong! African-American people are survivors! Advocates for African-American people seek to assist and assure equal footing for fair competition.

Become a pebble in oppression's shoe, irritate it until it stops to look and then Open up, Speak out, Take a risk, Refuse to accept privileges associated with oppression, and Challenge America to fully represent the "land of the free and the home of the brave." I recently heard a saying that struck my heart, "the smallest flea when strategically placed can bring down the largest dog" (Author Unknown). Strategically place yourself to bring down the walls of oppression affecting the lives of African-American people by advocating against tripartite oppression.

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Recommended Resources

- www.bazelon.org/bazelon/ mltog.html (Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law)
- www.shakey.net/advoc.html (Advocacy Watch-dog Group)
- www.imhl.com/advocacyproject.html (Advocacy Watch-dog Group)
- www.nagnotts.demon.co.uk/ advocate.htm
- Foundation of Advocacy for Mental Health, Inc. (518) 434-0439 ext. 22
- African-American Community Health Advisory Committee (415) 696-4678
- www.mhasp.org/policy/advalt.html (Public Policy Information and Advocacy Alerts) Mental health Assoc. of Southeastern PA
- The Advocacy Project, Granby Community Mental health Group, Liverpool England. Tel 0151-709-9442; Fax: 0151-709-0004

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